

A visit with Charlie Fargo

BY DAVID A. MITTELL, JR.

LongtimeTown Moderator Charlie Fargo is one of Duxbury's great living citizens. I've known that for a long time, but I have only come to appreciate his warm heart and generosity of spirit through the pleasure of dining with him a couple of times a week at Newfield House, where he now resides. Charles Henry Fargo Jr. was born to old (but never idle) money on both sides of his family. His grandfather Fargo ran the Fargo Hallowell Shoe Company. His mother's father, Francis Russell Hart, was president of the United Fruit Company. Charlie's father was a skilled aviator who flew missions for the British in World War I and later joined the American Air Corps. When Charlie was only six, his father was killed in a plane crash near Chicago, where he was already a prominent businessman. Apparently the publicity surrounding his accident attracted a copycat's threat to kidnap young Charlie after the murder of the Lindbergh baby in New Jersey a short time previously. From Boston, Charlie's grandfather sent round-the-clock security to the Chicago apartment where the Fargos lived. (Upstairs were the Gillettes — The Gillettes.) By and by, Charlie's mother moved Charlie and his brother Bronson back to the Boston area. Most of Charlie's childhood was spent on a large estate in Milton with summers in Padanaram and Duxbury.

An important turning point may have been that, whereas most of his family had attended Milton Academy, Charlie went to Milton High School. On the day he graduated he was drafted into the U.S. Army. During World War II, he served more than five years in Italy as an enlisted man — rising to the rank of master sergeant. When he speaks today of “dear friends” they can be from any walk of life. Charlie's return to Duxbury after the war can be likened to Odysseus' return to Ithaca from Troy. Having not seen his mother in five and a half years, he telephoned her when he got to Duxbury. The operator at the telephone office on Washington Street said, “She's at Eleanor Mac-Donald's. Would you like me to put you through?” Could this only be Duxbury? Mr. and Mrs. Roderick MacDonald of Harrison Street were having a cocktail party! Charlie's surprise appearance made it as joyous as any, ever.

The love of Charlie's life was Gwen Van Mater, whom he met on a blind date. Many of their early dates were on Sundays at Bruins' games in the owner's box at Boston Garden — since the owner's wife didn't like to attend hockey games on the Sabbath. Charlie made easy friends with many of the players. When he and Gwen were married in the lovely Episcopal Church in Newton Lower Falls, many Big Bad Bruins were there to bear witness.

Early in their marriage Charlie and Gwen lived on the top floor of his grandparents' home in Milton. Charlie worked for Hunneman & Co. (real estate) and later for the Bank of Boston. Soon the time came to move into their own place. To Hingham or Duxbury? Duxbury took the gonfalon. As Charlie tells it, the people they liked made the difference.

In 1954, a large field between Cedar Street and Lovers' Lane came on the market. There was a plan to build eight houses, which did not appeal to abutters Dr. Walter Deacon, Bill Dole and Dave Mittell, Sr. They purchased the land together, added some of the field to each of their

holdings and put two lots on the market. I can still hear my father saying, "We want nice people, like the Fargos!" And move in, they did.

In 1960, my family moved to my grandparents' beloved home, the Barn, in South Duxbury. But, among friends, what's 55 years of not a lot of contact? Today I warn the ladies at Newfield House of Charlie, "Watch out for this guy. He's from Lovers' Lane!"

In Duxbury, Charlie went into the real estate business with the late Henry Palmer. But the call of the town was always heard. When longtime Town Meeting Moderator Bartlett Bradley decided to retire, Charlie found himself called into the back room of the Duxbury Fish Market in the Sweetser's building — where in those days political deals were often made.

"We want you to run and we'll back you!" they said. He did, and he won and served in parts of three decades, before handing over the gavel to Allen Bornheimer. As moderator, Charlie had excellent relations with the town's employees, whom he liked and respected. He was the fourth of just six town moderators over the last 75 years. Some record for each of the six; some record for the town.

Among many public projects Charlie helped bring about was the (now newly expanded) fire station on Tremont Street. But I believe his greatest influence has been in doing critical behind-the-scenes work to bring about several important, highly beneficial private projects. He worked with the late Monsignor William Glynn to turn the former home of the Holy Family Church into the Ellison Center for the Arts; and he did all the quiet work to establish and build the Duxbury Bay Maritime School.

Charlie was a longtime trustee of the Duxbury Beach Reservation and Projects Gurnet and Bug Lights. He is a past commodore of the Duxbury Yacht Club. The list is long; at our next meal I expect to be reprimanded with a smile for the things I've left out.

Charlie always speaks with affection of the dear friends he misses: Monsignor William Glynn; Colby Hewitt; Ray Russo; Bill Spang; Alec Stohn. Another long list, headed always by his wife Gwen. But he reveres his children Charles III, Peter and Sara; his grandchildren; and lately, his two great grandchildren. Sorrow there must be. But Charlie Fargo always offers a quip and wears a smile.